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USA

Ferguson (USA): Police killing of young black man leads to national protests

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On August 9 a white police officer in the town of Ferguson, Missouri in the middle of the United States shot and killed Michael Brown a young black man. Such incidents are not uncommon in America, one could even say that they occur frequently, and, as in this case, sometimes lead to protests, vandalism and looting. What has made this case different than others and has brought national attention to the events taking place in Ferguson is the unprecedented level of military-style police repression in a small American town. The people of the United States like to think that our country is different than Syria, Egypt, the Ukraine, or Palestine where we have recently seen the police and military crush peaceful protestors. Ferguson has forced Americans to ask: Are we really any different?

Brown's killing brought not only protests in Ferguson, but also demonstrations in solidarity in dozens of cities across the United States. The killing has also led to a renewed national discussion about racism and to a new debate about the U.S. government's policy of pushing military equipment—\$37 billion dollars worth of it—on large cities and even small towns in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The federal government armed local police to fight terrorism, but critics argue that the tanks, guns, and grenades have been used instead against the country's poor communities of color and against social protestors. Some on the left argue that the combination of increased police surveillance of the citizenry together with militarized police forces is gradually turning America into a police state.

What exactly happened in Ferguson? A police officer named Darren Wilson shot and killed Brown, an 18-year old youth, on August 9. Several days after the event, police released a report claiming that Brown had forcefully stolen a box of cigars from a local store, though it was not clear that officer Wilson had any knowledge of that incident. One report said that Wilson had stopped Brown for jay-walking. Why the officer shot Brown was not clear. Brown's killing led immediately to protests by African Americans, some of which turned to vandalism and looting. The looting became the pretext for a massive display of military-type police force. Ferguson's chief of police, Tom Jackson, deployed the police, tanks, and tear gas not only against looters, but also against the peaceful protests of African American youth. Protestors responded by throwing Molotov cocktails at police. As Danny Lyon, a famous American photographer of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, told the New York Times, the images didn't look like the American police-protestor conflicts of that time, they looked like Soweto, South Africa in the era of apartheid.

Why Ferguson? Ferguson is a small town on the outskirts of St. Louis, Missouri, a major American city that sits on the Mississippi River. The town has a population of just 22,400 people, 53% African American and 45% white. The median household income in Ferguson is \$37,134, lower than the national median income of \$45,000. Some 22 percent of Ferguson residents live in poverty. While Ferguson is a small and usually quiet town, St. Louis, Missouri and East St. Louis, Illinois are cities with a long history of racial segregation, racial discrimination, and violent incidents. The St. Louis area has been badly hurt recently by the closing of many industrial plants, among them two Chrysler auto plants in nearby Fenton, Missouri. The closing of those plants took 15 billion dollars out of the regional economy as well as eliminating 6,400 jobs. As factories began to close in the St. Louis area in recent decades, some African Americans began to move out of the city into the surrounding suburbs such as Ferguson.

While the population in Ferguson gradually changed from white to black, the power structure remained virtually all white. In Ferguson, where more than half the population is black, only one of six city council members is black and the police are 94 percent white. The school board is white and an African American superintendent had recently been suspended by the school board. The hold-over white leadership in Ferguson did not represent the city's new population which was young, poor, and black. The combination of poverty, unemployment, and a lack of representation of African Americans in government, as well as the pervasive racism against black people in society

form the backdrop to Brown's killing.

The political establishment reacted swiftly to the events in Ferguson. President Barack Obama expressed sympathy with Brown's family, calling for transparency on the part of the police, but also condemning vandalism, looting, and violence. Libertarian Republican Rand Paul, a likely candidate for president in 2016, spoke out against racism and the militarization of local police forces. Missouri's Democratic Party Governor Jay Nixon sent in the state police to take responsibility for security in Ferguson, replacing the local police force, an act that was greeted with celebration by the town's African American population. Reverend Jesse Jackson, a historic figure in the African American civil rights movement and former a presidential candidate who is closely connected to the Democratic Party leadership, rushed to Ferguson to lead a protest demonstration there. Jackson is known for his role in both leading and in containing civil rights struggles.

Still, government leaders and politicians have been unable either to stop the continuing protests in Ferguson or the spreading national demonstrations in solidarity. African American youth and its Latino and white allies are everywhere in the streets, crying out against this latest incident of racial injustice and against the government's policy of militarizing the police.

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